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A General's Nam Expose

By DAVID IGNATIUS

Washington has an unlikely new cult book in Gen. Bruce Palmer's memoir of the Vietnam war, published last year by a small university press. The Pentagon bookstore has trouble keeping it in stock. So does Sidney Kramer's bookstore, located just a few blocks from the White House and frequented by National Security Council staffers.

The book's underground success—if you can call the Pentagon and the NSC an “underground”—is due partly to the reputation of Mr. Palmer, a former vice chief of staff of the U.S. Army who retired in 1974. But it is more a tribute to the book itself, which offers a senior military commander's honest, unsentimental account of the Vietnam war.

Although “The 25-Year War” (University Press of Kentucky, 236 pages, \$24) is organized around Mr. Palmer's experiences rather than overall principles of



Bookshelf

“The 25-Year War”
By Gen. Bruce Palmer

warfare, some clear themes do emerge. He argues that American military involvement in Vietnam, beginning May 1, 1950, and ending April 30, 1975, with the fall of Saigon, was “the longest conflict in American history” and our first defeat in war. He blames not only the civilian planners, who made serious errors, but also the military. From the joint chiefs of staff on down, he says, they failed to devise effective strategy or tactics in Vietnam.

Mr. Palmer's goal is to tell the truth, however painful it may be for the senior military officers and civilians who managed the war. In doing so, he challenges some of the myths and rationalizations about Vietnam that have grown up within the military during the last decade. Specifically, he questions whether:

—The military warned civilian leadership from the beginning that a limited war wasn't winnable. This argument is made frequently by retired commanders, but Mr. Palmer claims it just isn't so. He writes: “Not once during the war did the JCS advise the commander in chief or the secretary of defense that the strategy being pursued most probably would fail and that the United States would be unable to achieve its objectives.”

—The military leadership had a sound strategy to win the war but was prevented from doing so by meddlesome civilians. Here again, Mr. Palmer suggests that clarity of military judgment has come largely with hindsight. During the war, he says, “The JCS seemed to be unable to articulate an effective military strategy that they could persuade the commander in chief and secretary of defense to adopt. In the end, the theater commander—in effect, Gen. Westmoreland—made successive requests for larger and larger force levels without benefit of an overall concept and plan.”

—Gen. William Westmoreland's strategy of attrition was working until the U.S. political leadership lost its nerve after the 1968 Tet offensive. Mr. Palmer argues that the numbers didn't support Mr. Westmoreland's belief that the U.S. could bleed North Vietnam into submission. He notes: “At the height of the fighting in Vietnam, during the 1967-1969 period, when casualties were highest on both sides, there was no compelling evidence that North Vietnam was hurting for manpower to keep on fighting.”

—Robert McNamara was the chief villain of Vietnam, since he sent the military forces into battle and then turned his back on them. Mr. Palmer faults many of Mr. McNamara's decisions as secretary of defense, but he offers a surprisingly sympathetic portrait: “The strong-minded and seemingly insensitive McNamara gave an impression, perhaps unintentional, of arrogance, but underneath this hard exterior was a sensitive man. He had the perception to see that something was seriously awry in Vietnam, and the courage, right or wrong, to change his mind about the war.”

—The war could have been won quickly if the civilian leadership had unleashed the military in an all-out bombing campaign. Maybe, says Mr. Palmer, but he notes that the Army and Navy were always “skeptical” about the benefits of a massive bombing campaign, since “North Vietnam didn't possess the industrial development to justify strategic bombing.”

This is the voice of a professional soldier, trained to give honest advice, and it runs like a clear stream through “The 25-Year War.”

Mr. Palmer also writes with the anger of a career Army man who saw his service bent to the breaking point by Vietnam. His feelings come through in his portraits of some of the leading actors of the Vietnam years. He describes Henry Kissinger as an arrogant, moody man, and recalls one Kissinger tantrum in 1972 when the national security adviser seemed to take the side of Peking in a dispute about whether a U.S. fighter had strayed accidentally into Chinese airspace. He describes Mr. Kissinger's aide at the time, Gen. Alexander Haig, as an insatiably ambitious man who attained the rank of four-star general through “chair-borne duty in the White House.”

In a concluding section of the book, Mr. Palmer sums up the operational lessons of the war and what he calls the “larger lessons.” Chief among them is that fighting “limited” wars is difficult for a democracy. Caspar Weinberger has made the same argument recently, but not as poignantly as Mr. Palmer, who asks rhetorically whether we are “a greater people, a better nation” because we fought in Vietnam. He answers: “We are probably wiser, but certainly not stronger.”

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